

Donner Lake State Park captures its history



Donner Lake is uninviting on the lone stormy day of January. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

TRUCKEE – A park named after the Donner party should be visited in inclement weather. It's the best way to get a feel for what the 81-member wagon train went through in the winter of 1846-47.

While such weather has been scarce this winter, we ventured out in some last Saturday. Wind was blowing. The temperature was dropping. A mix of rain and snow drenched us. We were not as unprepared as the Donner party, which lost 36 people on the trek across the Sierra, but we certainly weren't ready for the elements.

For some reason we pushed on.



A soggy Sue treks through
Donner State Park on Jan.
11.

Being at the ocean on a stormy day is something I've always enjoyed. This was a bit like that. While the waves were nowhere near ocean-like, they were strong enough to appreciate the force of Mother Nature.

Donner Memorial State Park does not have many places to hike, but there is a 2½-mile roundtrip interpretive trail that is in large part along the lake.

We were happy to have our Yak Tracks on to contend with the ice on the trail.

With all the rocks, it appears Donner Lake is low like all the other lakes in the state. Interestingly, one of the interpretive signs talks about the seven-year drought that started in 1987. The frail lodgepole could not defend against the mountain pine beetle that thrived in the drought-weakened trees. Strong winds in winter 1994-95 blew many of the diseased trees to the ground.

While this area is known for the deadly, cannibalistic wagon train, it is also home to part of the original interstate system. Before Interstate 80 there was Highway 40. Signs are still in the area depicting Old Highway 40.



The day use area has great views, including to the towering (invisible on this day) granite wall where the railroad is.

But before that for a short time it was Highway 37. It was part of the 3,000-mile Lincoln Highway that went from coast-to-coast.

Before automobiles, though, there was the train. On this particular day it was too overcast to see up to the tracks. Those who ski Sugar Bowl know the name Judah. Theodore Judah was an engineer who surveyed the first transcontinental railroad.

It was Charles Crocker, Mark Hopkins, Leland Stanford and Collis P. Huntington who formed the Central Pacific Railroad Company. Mostly it was Chinese who in two years built the tracks through the Sierra for these barons of industry who capitalized off of what amounted to slave labor.

To this day Truckee has a train depot that takes travelers to points east and west.

The natural beauty and intriguing history make the lake and park a multi-dimensional visit – no matter the weather or season.

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Notes:

- Getting there: From Lake Tahoe head west on Interstate 80. Take the Donner Pass Road exit. (There is a sign saying Donner State Park.) Go left at the stop sign. The park is on the left. It costs \$8 to park or there is free parking on the road. If entering off the road, you'll see a sign that says "East Beach access" – veer left for the trail, right for the beach.
- Dogs are allowed on leash.
- A new museum – High Sierra Crossing Museum – at the park is expected to open later this year.